Suffering

NOTE: These notes consist of ideas found in or quotes from the sources listed at the end. They are especially influenced by Carson’s book ‘How Long O Lord?’

The reality of suffering and evil cannot be denied. It is an observation of experience.

Why do we ask the questions of suffering?

1. We want a reason because if we could understand / find meaning in suffering we would find it easier to suffer.
2. We want to find the solution to evil / suffering to so we can put an end to it
3. We want to find a way to reconcile Christian belief and doctrines with the presence of evil / suffering.
4. We want comfort and look for any explanation that provides comfort even if it is not true.

Ultimately there are no final answers to the question of the existence of suffering / evil but some answers are better than others. We seek the best answers whilst acknowledging the surrounding mystery. Why God allows us to suffer is ultimately a mystery.

What is the problem of pain / suffering?

The logic:

1. God is all powerful (omnipotent)
2. God is perfectly good / loving and if you are perfectly good and loving then you prevent suffering if you can
3. BUT suffering exists
   THEREFORE God does not exist or is not all powerful or is not perfectly loving / good (ie. unwilling to end suffering)

People say that statements 1, 2, and 3 are inconsistent. They can’t all be true at the same time. The problem is though that people tend to give meanings to the words omnipotence / good / loving that do not truly represent a Biblical faith. The words ‘all powerful’ and ‘good / loving’ can mean different meanings.

OMNIPOTENCE:

Means the power to do all. Scripture says that all things are possible with God. But can God do that which is impossible? Things that are self-contradictory are impossible eg. Can God create a stone which is too heavy for him to lift? God can do all things that are possible but it is nonsense to say that God can do the impossible (contradictory).

Some say that God’s omnipotence cannot include having the power to create a creature with free will, who is also at the same time not free to cause suffering. This is contradictory! God doesn’t have the power to intervene and stop suffering (or he limits himself).

PROBLEM: God does sometimes override free will and stop people against their will eg. Salvation of people from Egypt relies on the fact that God hasn’t limited himself to accept
free will. God does have the power to intervene and this is not an accurate picture of a Biblical God.

Others do not deny that God can’t do the contradictory but say that from a Biblical point of view human free-will and God being all powerful are compatible in some mysterious way of faith. These are not contradictory and so there must be some other reason for God allowing suffering.

LOVE / GOODNESS

The goodness of God - In the midst of the sin and death in the Bible God is seen as good. In God there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5; Deuteronomy 32:4; Nahum 1:2,7; James 1:13)

Does love / doing really mean that people never suffer? e.g. doctor mending a broken leg needs to straighten it out for it to heal, but this produces pain OR a parent has to allow a child to go through the anxiety of the first night away from home etc. Jesus suffered on the cross to do good and for love.

Love does not mean that you prevent all suffering

The logic of the problem of pain above is flawed and is a misunderstanding of what love, goodness and omnipotence actually mean in Christianity.

The origin of sin, suffering and death – The Bible’s storyline

As Christian’s who believe the authority of scripture in Christian belief we must allow the Bible’s teaching and storyline to define the boundaries on our thinking about suffering and evil.

- Gen. 1-2 – God creates the heavens and the earth = ‘very good’. There is no human sin or suffering.
- Gen. 3 – The first human rebellion leads to suffering, toil, pain and death.
- Sin is the source of human death. Romans 6:23 – Wages of sin is death.
- Gen. 5 – we read the repeated refrain “he died … he died … he died …”

Due to the Fall humanity is now broken and a creature ill-adapted to the universe because he has made himself so by the abuse of his free will.

- The end of the Bible sees the ultimate repairing of the damage. Rev. 21:1 – A new heavens and a new earth. 2 Peter 3:13 - A home of righteousness. Rev. 21:3-5 – God living with men, no tears, no death, crying or pain as the old order of things has passed away. The end of suffering and the end of sin. Rev. 21:27 – nothing impure will enter God’s new heavens and earth.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE BIBLICAL VIEW
• The world is not populated by largely good people. Yet the Bible does speak of the relative ways of righteous and unrighteous of people. None is as evil as we might be.
• If there had been no sin, there would have been no death, and no illness which leads to death.
• Death must be seen not as unfairness but as God’s well-considered sentence against our sin. Death is no accident; it is God’s doing (Psalm 90:3-6). The never-ending slide toward death is the outworking of God’s judgment “when you eat of it you will surely die” (Gen 2:17).
• We are responsible participants in our own death. Death is not simply something that happens to me. It happens to me because I am a sinner. In that sense I have caused death (however it happens).
• It is because of the God’s mercy that we are not all instantly punished with death whenever we sin.

All suffering cannot be tied to specific sins that have been committed

• Illness and death can linked to the immediate judgement of a specific sin. eg. 2 Kings 5:20-27; Acts 5 – deaths of Ananias and Sapphira; 1 Cor. 11:27-32
• Not every bit of suffering is the immediate consequence of a particular sin. The people who suffer most are not necessarily those who have sinned the most. The Bible demonstrates this eg. Jesus suffering on the cross, The man born blind – John 9. Gal. 4:13 – Paul testifies that an illness in God’s providence directed him in the first instance to Galatia. 1 Timothy 5:23 – Timothy was afflicted with frequent illnesses. In none of these instances is illness or death linked to a specific sin.
• There are some illnesses and deaths that are the consequences of sinful acts or behaviour, where there is no super natural judgement but the natural outworking of cause and effect under God’s providence eg. deaths as a result of gluttony, pollution etc.
• Illness and death are a consequence of our rebellious condition; they may not necessarily be tied to a particular sin though.

God’s sovereignty and human freedom

The Bible as a whole teaches that:

1) That God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in a way that human responsibility is diminished.
2) Human beings are morally responsible creatures and they are rightly held accountable for their actions; but human responsibility never functions so as to make God absolutely dependent on human actions.

As far as the Bible is concerned these two ideas are mutually compatible. How they are is part of the mystery of faith and suffering.

IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS:
• God’s sovereignty never negates his goodness. Biblically God is never presented as an accomplice of evil, as secretly malicious or as standing behind evil in exactly the same way that he stands behind good. The goodness of God is the non-negotiable.
• God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet he is not the author of evil / suffering.
• Human freedom since the fall cannot be discussed without reference to the fall. Everyone is a slave to sin (John 8:34).
• Real freedom is freedom to obey God without restraint or reserve. It is not absolute power to do the contrary to what we do; it is wanting to please God at every moment.
• When the Bible speaks of God’s permission of evil, there is still no escape from his sovereignty. A sovereign and omniscient God who knows, that if he permits something to occur it will surely occur.
• God’s sovereignty functions to assure us that things are not getting out of control. With his love, God’s sovereignty assures the Christian that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28)

Why does God allow suffering and evil to exist?: The greater good + Justice

• Even if we can explain how a good / loving God and suffering / evil can exist together this does not explain why God chose to create this actual world with all its evils.
• The answer can only be because God has a reason for creating the world as it is. That reason must presumably along the lines of: that out of evil and suffering a greater good would come, a good that could not have come, or could not have been as great if there had not been that evil or suffering.
• The greater-good explanation of suffering and evil: Knowing that God is declared as good and therefore would only do things which are good. Also, given the evil actually occurs (which God could have prevented), why did God not prevent it, but rather allow it? The answer provided by the greater-good defence is: because only in permitting evil could certain good ends be achieved.
• The greater good defence has seeds which are present in the NT (eg. Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Timothy 2:12). Suffering works for or produces glory.
• The goodness of the goods outweighs the evils which are permitted.
• The greater good ‘idea’ can explain adequately explain why God allows some suffering / evil, but does it adequately explain all occurrences of evil / suffering eg. Why the Holocaust?
• A second justification for the permitting of evil is that suffering / evil is permitted by God as punishment for other evils. And the reason why some evil is ordained by God is for the punishment of that first evil. The good that is brought about is justice.
• However, not all suffering / evil can be to do with justice because logically something bad must have happened first for punishment / justice to be necessary.
• Can we identify which suffering is linked to judgement? eg. Haiti earthquake? Problem: in scripture judgement usually follows warning. It is hard to say after the event if it is linked to judgement if there has been no specific warning!

The unique suffering of the people of God
• God disciplines his people – Hebrews 12:5-12; Prov. 3:11-12. In Hebrews 12 the discipline that is talked about is the discipline to help Christians overcome sin. The writer sees discipline as an encouragement as God loves us and has accepted us as children. This discipline is for our God that we may share in his holiness. In discipline God is training us to persevere.
• God’s discipline throughout scripture may include war, plague, illness, rebuke, bereavement, loss of status etc. Many of these things though can be the consequence of a fallen world though as well. There is ambiguity.
• Prolonged suffering such as from chronic illness is certainly not a ‘good’ thing, yet rightly accepted it can breed patience, compassion for others, teach the discipline of prayer, self-knowledge etc.
• If self-examination shows us how to improve, we ought to improve. But there are times when all the Christian can responsibly do is to trust his heavenly Father in the midst of darkness and pain.
• We face opposition and persecution for being the people of God
• We are called to die to our sinful selves: That this process cannot be without pain.

At the start we said:

‘Ultimately there are not final answers to the question of the existence of suffering / evil but some answers are better than others. We seek the best answers whilst acknowledge the surrounding mystery. Why God allows us to suffer is ultimately a mystery.’

We have seen some snippets of answers to the question of suffering but none gives a full and complete explanation for existence of suffering and evil in every specific case. Some of the best answers of why suffering and evil exist are:

• God is good, loving, sovereign and trustworthy. Yet, God also allows human responsibility / freedom. Biblically God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are compatible with each other in a mysterious way.
• Since the Fall we live in a world broken by sin. We are all victims and villains when it comes to sin.
• God is making the world anew and one day will wipe away all suffering.
• Death, illness and physical suffering come as a consequence of God’s judgement at the fall.
• God is good and if he allows evil / suffering to continue to exist it must be ultimately for a greater good, even though we may not know what this is.
• Sometimes God uses evil / suffering to enact justice against sin / evil.
• As God’s people we experience unique suffering – discipline, persecution and the painful process of dying to self (the overcoming of sin).

However we are left with the mystery of faith.

Sources:


Mike Ovey (of Oak Hill Theological College), Seminar on the ‘Sovereignty of God’ given at Skegness Spring Harvest (Word Alive) 2006, UK


Yancey, P., *Where is God When it Hurts?*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990)